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Time for Truth

A seemingly unlimited capacity for self-deception, and a determined, even reproachful, refusal to face unpleasant facts, have been demonstrated anew in the reactions of the Israeli establishment and much of the media to Hassan Tohami's interview with the Kuwaiti newspaper *El-Siassa*.

Tohami is not a free-lance journalist, nor an oppositionist in exile. He is deputy prime minister of Egypt and by any criterion the third or fourth most important member of her government. Nor is there any indication that he ever raised objections internally to the negotiations with Israel. On the contrary: he was designated to conduct the first talks with Foreign Minister Dayan, and by all accounts played a substantial, and not obstructive, part in the negotiations at Camp David.

In the interview, he made not the remotest suggestion that his statements could conflict with the "peace process" which he helped set in motion. He is all for it. He was only describing the kind of peace he and his colleagues envisage; and one of the elements in that picture is, it so happens, a highly uncomplimentary view of Israel and its people.

In fact, the gut attitude, reflected in his interview not only towards Israel but to the Jewish people in general, is not new. It is standard thinking and teaching for Arab Moslem leaders. Arab literature is redolent with it; and Arab schoolchildren imbibe it in their textbooks.

It is indeed an accurate paraphrase of a public vow made by President Sadat himself. In the El-Hussein Mosque in Cairo on April 25, 1972, Sadat not only attacked Israel over its "occupation of Palestine" but promised that he would "crush Israel's arrogance and return them to the humiliation and wretchedness established in the Koran". The Jews, he added, "are a nation of liars and traitors, contrivers of plots, a people born for deeds of treachery".

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Still, why did Mr. Tohami choose to make his hideous statements precisely now — when negotiations are still in progress? This is perhaps the most ominous aspect of the interview: evidently neither he nor Sadat, nor the Egyptian government, is particularly concerned at possible Israeli reactions. And with reason. Tohami's interview coincided with the transfer of the major part of Sinai to Egyptian hands; Israel has given up her only independent source of oil; the oil weapon is being brandished by the Arab states, and the US and the other Western nations are all exerting pressure on Israel to go even beyond the dire terms of the Camp David agreement and assure immediately that Judea, Samaria and Gaza shall become Arab sovereign territory. Perfectly logical, then, was Tohami's opening statement: "The time has come to tell the truth".

One of Tohami's central themes was that Israel is a spiritually defeated nation. He referred in contemptuous terms to Israel's "love of remaining alive, which will lead them to give up land". He consequently does not believe that a war will be necessary. A process of spiritual attrition among the Jews of Israel — through this overriding desire, as he sees it, to save their skins —

will bring about their submission to the “900 million Moslems who want Jerusalem restored to its Arabic character”.

Never was a more effective, and tragically well-deserved, rejoinder given to those muddle-headed Israelis — including proclaimed leaders and moulders of public opinion — who insist that the Jewish people must on no account claim its historic right to the land (that we should in fact, collaborate with the Arabs in erasing our history) but must confine itself to demanding conditions that will assure the bare bones of the state’s security.

Since Tohami draws his conclusions from repeated statements emanating from Israel, and knowing what strategy he and his colleagues have mapped out for the further stages of the “peace process,” should we be surprised that Tohami finds it reasonable to foresee the end of the Jewish “demi-state”?

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Mr. Tohami, moreover, has now found it safe to spell out the truth about the beginning of the “peace process”: the hoax known as the “Sadat initiative”. The notion that, after 29 years of hostility and war, the Egyptian statesman, manifesting unparalleled courage and an unequalled passion for peace, came suddenly flying to Jerusalem to seek peace, tangibly changed the course of history: overnight Sadat became a world hero. His prestige, and Egypt’s, in the US and through the West, soared to dizzying heights.

In contrast, when Israel did not immediately announce far-reaching concessions of territory in response to Sadat’s visit, she was not only belaboured by her regular critics but criticized by her regular friends. All that followed was coloured by the immediate impact of the Sadat initiative.

Now, Tohami has confirmed that there was no such initiative. Sadat paid his spectacular visit to Jerusalem only after he had received assurances from Begin (at earlier meetings between Tohami and then Foreign Minister Dayan) that Israel was prepared to give up all of Sinai to Egypt.

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The truth did not remain a complete secret for long, but it never received wide publicity. Too many people in government and the media who had gone overboard in glorifying Sadat, were interested in maintaining the pretence that an Arab leader had taken the first great step towards peace.

Nevertheless, the thrust of Sadat’s thinking soon became apparent. First, the offer of Sinai was made public (as though in response to the Sadat visit): then there was the revelation that Sadat vehemently rejected even the slightest easement — such as permitting the residents in the Yamit district to continue living there under Egyptian sovereignty. And there was his utterly absurd attribution of “sanctity” to the soil of Sinai. It did not take long for it to become obvious that the only material and irreversible change that was taking place was a major surrender of territory by Israel and the jettisoning of the minimal conditions for her security in the south (as planned and built by the most moderate of Alignment governments).

As negotiations proceeded, the Egyptians' overall purpose continued to be stated without reservation: Israel's withdrawal to the 1949 armistice lines, and "self-determination for the Palestinian people".

Sadat also insisted adamantly, and was successful in ensuring, that the peace treaty would not even formally bind Egypt to keep the peace if she is called upon by any Arab state or states to make war upon Israel. In brief, Egypt is as committed as she ever was to war with Israel for all-Arab objectives.

Only she is now faced by an already weakened Israel. Mr. Tohami in his interview added the fascinating, and significant, detail that it was the first contacts with Dayan that "opened the door to *our thinking* that a policy of action, military or political, would reduce Israel to a state of complete attrition, where the love of remaining alive would lead the Jews to give up the land".

The pattern is now clearer than ever. The Egyptians want peace — the kind of peace outlined by Mr. Tohami. They hope to achieve it by the continued attrition of the people of Israel. In case that does not succeed, they will go on labouring to ensure the best possible strategic conditions for the Arab side in a future war. Is it not time, as Mr. Tohami said, for the truth to be told — and faced — by Israel as well?